

## CHANCES OF MEN AND WOMEN TO RETURN TO THE LABOUR MARKET AFTER CHILD-CARE LEAVE

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### **Abstract:**

The reconciliation of work and private life has become one of the most important topics today, receiving more and more attention from management researches. Already supported by several studies, it can now be said that family-friendly governmental and organisational solutions may ease the various conflicts ensuing from the reconciliation process: one such solution is the wide range of child-care leaves reserved for families with a new-born baby. Hungary belongs to the EU member states with the longest such child-care leave period, which can be taken by men and women alike. This possibility has a positive effect on family life; however, the question still remains: how does it influence an individual's chance of re-integration to the labour market when the child-care leave expires? This essay is using the results of two empirical researches to outline the chances and prospects of those men and women who had a shorter or longer period of child-care leave and now would like to actively return to the labour market. We are examining, among other things, how employers and employees see the chances of re-integration, as well as how tolerant different organisations are with these returning employees. To give a complete picture, we had a look at the possibilities of not only women who decide to stay at home on child-care leave, but also those of men making the same decision. We conducted our researches on men and women in 2008 and 2011 respectively; the essay contains the partial results of the two studies.

*Keywords: reconciliation of work and private life, child-care leave, return to the labour market.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION OR A FEW WORDS ON HUNGARIAN CHILD-CARE LEAVE PRACTICES

As the reconciliation of work and family life is no longer a problem on an individual level, it is no wonder that governments are also trying to initiate macro-economic possibilities for employers to make it easier for them to balance their labour, as well as their family, commitments. One such popular method is the wide range of so-called child-care leaves.

The European Union already introduced its Directive on European Parental Leave in 1996, which states that women are entitled to at least 3 months of unpaid leave after bearing or adopting a child (in line with ILO regulations). EU member states are still implementing this directive in different ways in so far as they allow different lengths of child-care leave for their employers; there is a lack of unified regulation regarding the number of people entitled to this or the paid-unpaid nature of the directive.

Moss, for example (2008, referred to by Korintusné, 2009, p. 67), calculated the months of available leave, and, taking into consideration the fact that paid leaves should provide at least two-thirds of the regular salary, managed to divide the 19 EU member states into three categories. His researches showed that there are countries providing 9 or more months of child-care leave (including Hungary), countries with 4–6 months of leave and, finally, the last group contained countries which provided less than 2 months of paid absence. The aim of this paper is not to argue for or against the right kind of practice; however, the fact remains that the longer parents stay at home with their child, the more this influences their chances of re-integration into the labour market. Employers get out of practice, they may not keep up with the new developments in their field of work, their previous position or place of work might change or disappear altogether; they may not even be able to do the same work again due to psychological difficulties.

Hungary is one of the countries with the longest amount of possible child-care leaves in the European Union. Our country has several absence forms designed specifically for child-care. There is, among others, the so-called maternity leave, which only pregnant women or young mothers are entitled to; the length of this leave is 24 weeks. During this time, social security pays these mothers pregnancy child-bed allowance (based on several conditions) and child-care allowance (as a subjective right).

On the expiry of the maternity leave, the parents are usually entitled to an unpaid leave until the third birthday of the child (or longer in the case of sick or permanently handicapped children).

Those people who accept the above leave form may on certain conditions receive a so-called child-care fee (*gyed*), while it is their subjective right to receive maternity benefit (*gyes*). *Gyed* is a type of payment which only parents with social security insurance may get until the child reaches 2; the amount is 70 % of the calendar daily income, but it may not exceed the 70 % of the double amount of the current minimal wage.

*Gyes* is a subjective right which people are usually entitled to until the child reaches 3 (except for a few special cases like twin birth, custody or lasting illness). The monthly amount of *gyes* always equals the minimal amount of old-age pension. *Gyes* allows for a maximum work of 6 hours, and the parent on *gyes* is protected by the Hungarian Labour Code from being sacked. However, the new Hungarian Labour Code which is coming into force in July 2012 also

allows the parent to return to the labour market earlier than the 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday of the child: in this case, their employer is bound to provide them with 4-hour-long part-time work, but only until the child is 3. At present, employers are not obliged to provide this opportunity.

Regarding child-care leaves, fathers are also entitled to 5 working days' worth of leave benefit, which the father may take maximum two months after his child's birth. For this period, fathers receive a co-called absence fee.

It is important to mention that fathers and mothers alike may take child-care leave in Hungary, which means couples are free to decide which parent may stay at home with the child. Naturally, we cannot say that the practice of fathers staying at home with the children is a widespread one today. According to the 2011 data of the National Health Insurance Fund (OEP) only 5–6 % of the families who were actively rearing children chose the father to take care of the baby, which means that only 1 % of those taking *gyed* were men. There was a somewhat higher percentage of men among those taking *gyes* in 2007 as this benefit allows people to work (for a maximum of 6 hours a day), and so families had greater freedom to consider the right family member for this task.

The above picture is partially the result of the fact that the traditional views on family roles are still very strong within the family itself; however, the researches of the last ten years (Blaskó 2002; Spéder 2009), are beginning to show that a more modern approach have already appeared next to, or even as an alternative to, the traditional model.

At the same time, the traditional view is strengthened by the fact that Hungarian male workers receive bigger salaries for the same job than women. (Tóth, 2004 referred to by Wolgemuth). This practice greatly influences the final decision of parents as to who should stay at home: the final decision is usually that the mother goes on child-care leave.

In the year 2010, approximately 11.9 % of the inactive population aged between 15 and 61 received some form of child-care benefit in Hungary (Central Statistical Agency, KSH). However, statistics also show that labour seeking is influenced by a lack of solution to finding a suitable caretaker as well as a narrow selection of atypical employment forms. The fact remains: this field still needs a lot of improvement.

As a lot of child-care institutions closed after the change of the regime in 1989, the lack of available child-care spaces was observable as early as the turn of the millennium. This, among other things, has a negative impact on the re-integration of those wishing to return to the labour market after child-care leave. Although the number of available child-care spaces is slowly increasing today, crèches, for example, are still operating at a 130 % overload. While the Ministry of National Resources claim that crèches only use 90 % of all available spaces (2011 data), an extension will be necessary as the new Public Education Law coming into force in 2014 will make kindergarten education compulsory.

Finally, the introduction of further atypical employment forms will be necessary. This can be supported by advocating the positive examples as strongly as possible towards employers and employees alike. Among other things, the government is going to use the new Labour Code (coming into force in July 2012) to help women to take part-time jobs at least until their child is 3.

## 2. RESEARCH PROCESS, METHODS AND RESULTS

Although the long period of child-care leave has a lot of positive aspects, it is not always a clear advantage for the employers, especially when they return to the labour market. Unfortunately, although the Hungarian Labour Code provides protection for those returning from child-care leave (among other things, a prohibition of layoff until the child reaches 3), practice shows that these employees are still at a disadvantage with their former employers. It is no wonder then that we made empirical research even in our 2008 and 2011 studies to see the general opinion on, as well as the chances of re-integration for, those men and women who went on a longer or shorter period of child-care leave.

After the secondary studies, both our researches contained a qualitative and a quantitative part. As our researches were rather complex, we are only going to publish a few of our results in this paper. We are using our results to prove the following hypothesis in this essay:

### Hypothesis 1

*We assume that those female employees who are on child-care leave will be able to return to the labour market with greater difficulty, while men also on such a leave will have less problem returning to work.*

As we have already mentioned, we conducted two researches to outline the chances of parents currently on child-care leave to return to the world of work.

We conducted our first research among young mothers in 2008. This research had both a qualitative and a quantitative part. The qualitative research was conducted within a group of women currently taking a labour re-integration course. The course itself was basically a personality-improvement training where the attendants received primarily psychological and legal assistance to improve their chances of returning to the labour market. The in-depth interviews made there revealed that young mothers had a rather negative outlook on their chances of re-integration, which they explained with their out-of-date professional knowledge, the attitude of their employers, a lack of tolerance and their own reduced self-esteem.

The qualitative research was followed by a quantitative examination. We used a primarily closed-question questionnaire consisting of nominal and ordinal scales. Our chosen methods of analysis were one-variable in most cases, with the one multiple-variable one being a rather simple cross-table analysis. The questionnaire was filled in by 252 women who were on child-care leave, or, even if only a short time earlier, had started to work again. We used the snowball method as a sampling technique, which means our research was not representative; however, we still believe it gives an appropriate outlook of the national situation and general practice.

The oldest of those women questioned was 46, while the youngest was 18. 45 % of those who answered the questions had 1, 35.1 % had 2 while 15.5 % had 3 children; 4.4 % had more than 3. We asked in the questionnaire how their employers received the news of their pregnancy. The answers revealed that approximately 53 % of the employers had a positive and supporting response to this news, while 30.8 % were indifferent and a sobering 10.5 % of them reacted in an actively hostile way; 5.7 % reacted in a way different from the above. We examined whether there is any connection between the reaction of the employer and the

number of years the young mother spent at her work, but we were not able to find a significant connection between these two variables (Pearson chi-square: 16.161 df: 15 sign.: .371  $p > 0.05$ ).

At the same time, it was interesting to see that 67.9 % of the women asked did not make any arrangement with their boss as to when they would return to their work. Although the mothers were aware of the fact that the longer they stayed away from the labour market, the more practice they would lose in the end, only 3.7 % of them planned to return to work within 1 year, while 11.4 % of them were sure that they would stay at home with their children for more than 3 years. When we examined this question based on education level, we saw that irrespective of their level of education, most mothers wanted to stay at home with their child for 3 years.

We asked our participants whether they would have returned to work earlier than planned at the birth of the baby if they had been given this chance. We found that 71 % would not have returned. We then examined this question based on education, and the Pearson chi-square test seemed to justify our assumption: 13.699 df: 2 sign.: .001  $p < 0.05$ . At the same time, the strength was rather weak: Cramer's V: 0.235 sign.: .001  $p < 0.05$ . 78.1 % of those with tertiary, 69.9 % with secondary and 47.4 % with primary certificate would not have gone back to work even if they had been offered this chance.

Unsurprisingly, employers were forced to find some solution to the long absence of their employees. 35.55% of them tried restructuring, 59.2 % hired new workforce, and, finally, 5.3 % turned to atypical methods to make up for their missing employee.

67.3 % of all places of work kept in contact with the mothers during their child-care leave, and 52.7 % of all the mothers were actually planning to return to their original work. We were interested whether women were influenced in their decision to return to their original work by the fact that their employers kept in contact with them. To find this out, we conducted a cross-table analysis to see the connection between the two nominal variables. The Pearson chi-square test showed: 86.287, df: 2, sign.: .000  $p < 0.05$ , a significant connection; at the same time, Cramer's V: 0.601 sign.: .000  $p < 0.05$  demonstrated a stronger than average connection between the two variables.

If the mother decided to return to their previous employers, they also received help from them to reconcile work and family life in 69 % of the cases. 56.6 % of them offered them flexible working hours, 15.7 % home-work, 33.7 % part-time work, and, finally, 10.8 % could offer their employees child-care opportunity.

We included questions in the questionnaire to find out how young mothers can live up to their employers' expectations. The following chart is showing what percentage of the women asked would have been able to meet the requirements of their employers:

**Table 1:** Women Who Meet Employer Requirements

Employer Requirements	YES %
Ability to Start Work Immediately	46.70
Up-to-Date knowledge	54.60
Home-Training during Child-Care Leave	58.0
Ability to Work Overtime	13.3
Ability to Take Positions Involving Travel	12.1
Ability to Take Part in Weekend Trainings	16.2
Ability to Solve the Child's Sickness without Missing from Work	46.9

The answers showed that although young mothers tried to keep up with professional requirements during child-care, they would have been less able to shape their family commitments – which they could not really influence in the first place – according to their employers' wishes.

When asked whether they considered their child to be a disadvantage in the labour market, a surprising 70 % answered yes. We examined the answers based on education, but the Pearson chi-square test did not show significant differences: 5.154 df: 2 sign.: .076  $p > 0.05$ .

The final question was this: what can firms do in order to facilitate their employees' return to the world of work, despite all the difficulties? Some of the answers the respondents gave contained the inclusion of atypical forms of employment, keeping up contact between employer and the employee on child leave, a more tolerant attitude and the possibility for child-care helpers. All these solutions were supposed to provide an easier transition.

Upon finishing our research on young mothers, we initiated a second research in 2011, the basic aim of which was to see the Hungarian society's attitude towards those families where the father decides to stay at home with the child. We wanted to know how respondents see the situation and the chances of re-integration of these fathers as well as to outline the situation in which the father makes the decision of going on child-care leave. This research also consisted of two parts: one qualitative and one quantitative.

As part of the quantitative research, we conducted in-depth interviews with 7 families where the fathers had either been on child-care leave for some time or was on such a leave at the moment of the interview. We interviewed the couples separately from each other, making sure that they would not be able to influence the responses of the other.

In line with the hypothesis made by us earlier, all but one of the fathers interviewed had made the decision of staying at home for material reasons: their spouse made more money than them. Only one father claimed his decision had an emotional underlying reason: he simply wanted to spend more time with his child.

The general reaction of the fathers' employer was surprise on hearing about their decision, but only one father mentioned a negative reaction. As the fathers said, they might not have developed professionally during their leave, but they had become more mature regarding their emotional communication: they got more tolerant, understanding and patient, and they were also able to handle unexpected situations easier than before.

Regarding the question of re-integration into their work, the fathers said they did not feel disadvantageous to stay at home for a shorter or longer period of time. They admitted that

they would not necessarily have revealed at a job interview that they had stayed at home with the child: they felt that they should be judged based on their professional skills, and informing their future employer about their previous decision would not give them any advantage. At the same time, they did not feel that they wasted their time by staying at home, and those of them who had already returned to their work claimed that they had been able to re-integrate on an emotional, as well as practical, level.

Based on our in-depth interview experience, we conducted a questionnaire research in the autumn of 2011 to find out, among other things, how respondents judge these fathers and how they valued the labour-market possibilities of men who are currently on child-care leave.

Our questionnaire was based primarily on nominal and ordinal interval scales with a small number of interval scales based on the Likert scale. We used mainly closed questions, and our sampling technique, just like earlier, was the snowball method, so our research cannot be considered representative. We managed to collect 290 samples using these methods; in the evaluation phase, we used both one-variable and multiple-variable (cross-table analysis) methods. In this paper, we are only going to present the results of our research which can be tied to our hypothesis.

We are beginning by specifying the sample. Based on gender, 40.3 % of those filling in the questionnaire were men, while 59.7 % were women. Regarding age, the samples typically represented people between 19 and 30 (55.2 %), while, 17.2% were over 50, 15,2 % were between 31 and 40, 10.3 % between 41 and 50 and, finally, 2.1% were under 18. As for the educational level, 11.4 % of those questioned had only primary education, 46.9 % had secondary and 41.7 % had tertiary qualifications.

We were interested how much the respondents agreed with the situation of the father staying home with the child on child-care leave. 70.9% of the respondents accepted such a decision while 29.1 % did not. We examined whether there was any difference in the answers regarding age categories, but the Pearson chi-square test did not show any significant difference: .996 df: 4, sign.: .910  $p > 0.05$ . It was interesting to see that approximately 74 % of the older generation (people over 50) tolerated the fathers in a child-care role, while the same figure in the younger generation (people under 18) was only 66.7 %; 69.8 % of the people between 18 and 30 agreed with the fathers' such decision. There was no significant gender-based difference in the opinions either: 74.4 % of the women and 65.8 % of the men could accept the above situation (Pearson chi-square: 2.502 df: 1, sign.: .114  $p > 0.05$ ).

The respondents were required to answer the question of what kind of reasons families can give to justify the father's absence from work. The answers seemed to indicate that most respondents (51.7 %) found material considerations the most acceptable, while 14 % mentioned the mother's career, 11.5 % a loss of job, 6.6 % the father's emotional considerations, 4.9 % problems at work, 2.1 % the father's wish to stay at home and 1.7 % other factors in this decision; finally, 7.3 % of all respondents could not accept any reason why the father should stay at home. These answers fit in with earlier finding according to which the Hungarian families make such decisions based primarily on financial, and only secondarily on emotional, considerations. The emotional factors were further strengthened by 64.4 % of the respondents, who claimed that the fathers' presence in child-caring would have the same emotional effect on the child as the mother. 14.8 % said the father may even have a more positive influence on the child than the mother, while 20.8 % of those questioned claimed the father's child-caring role would influence the child in a negative way.

It was interesting to see that there was a difference between men and women regarding the above question (Pearson chi-square test: 6.643, df: 2 sign.: .036  $p < 0.05$ ). Women seemed to be more flexible in this respect as only 15.8 % of them claimed that men would have a negative impact on the child, while the same figure among men was 28.3 %.

The same significant difference was visible among men and women regarding their opinion of fathers who stay at home with their children. While 61.5 % of all men judged these men, only 38.5 % of all women did so. The significant difference was underlined by the Pearson chi-square test: 5.530 df: 1 sign.: .019  $p < 0.05$ . This marked difference seemed to suggest that masculine roles are stronger in men, and they felt it out of character to have to stay at home with a child. It was also interesting to see that there was a significant difference in opinions based on education too. While 21.2 % of those with only primary education judged heavily those men who decided to go on child-care leave, the same figure was only 7.4 % and 7.7 % among those with secondary and tertiary education respectively. The Pearson chi-square test also showed a similar education-based difference: Pearson chi-square test: 6.585 df: 2 sign.: .037  $p < 0.05$ . The results of our researches fit in with other social studies. For example, a KSH-research conducted in 2009 (Zsolt Spéder, 2009) showed that people with lower education expect the father to provide for the financial needs of the family – expecting the traditional role of family supporter – while people with higher education found emotional factors also important: showing parental affection was considered to be a father role by 36 % of people with a tertiary degree.

The people asked by our questionnaire also had to answer how they saw such a decision would affect a father's career. 58.9 % of the respondents said such a decision would affect them negatively, 35.8 % saw no possible negative effect while only 5.3 % thought that a father's career would receive a positive boost from a decision of child-care leave. We examined the answers regarding education, and we found that there is a significant difference in this respect. The more optimistic group contained people with a diploma: only 47 % thought that such a decision would not affect the father's career negatively, as opposed to the people with elementary education where 60.6 % thought this decision would have a negative career outcome. The most pessimistic people were those with secondary education, where 68.9 % predicted a negative outcome after such a decision. The results of the Pearson chi-square test showed a significant difference based on education: 13.325 df: 4 sign.: .010  $p < 0.05$ . There was no such significant difference regarding gender: 63.5 % of all men and 55.9 % of all women thought that such a decision would affect a man's career negatively (Pearson chi-square test: 1.756 df: 1 sign.: .416  $p > 0.05$ ). The respondents found that the most likely male candidates for staying at home on *gyes* were men in subordinate positions (with 62.9 % of respondents thinking this way), while the least likely candidates were men in management positions (70.9 % saying so).

66.1 % of the respondents felt that the employers have a negative attitude towards a male employer who goes on *gyes*, while 28.6 % was indifferent and 5.3 % expected a positive reaction. In spite of all this, the majority (75.8 %) said that a man does not necessarily have to conceal the fact that he was on *gyes* (with 79.4 % of women and 70.4 % of men thinking so).

Approximately 34.7 % of those who filled in the questionnaire claimed that fathers may need help for their re-integration to the labour market. The following chart is showing the opportunities which, in the respondents' opinion, should be offered by employers:



**Table 2: Possible Employer Offers**

Employer Help	YES %
Flexible-Time Work	41.80
Part-Time Work	19.30
Telework	17.90
Shared Position	9.8
Mentor Help	6.7
Individual Help	7.7

Our final enquiry was aimed the respondents' view of how the possibility of going on child-care leave may help a man to harmonize work and family commitments. About 54.4 % claimed this possibility may help their problem, and 49.8 % would have also taken this opportunity should it present itself. In this last question, that is, in the question of whether they would like to try out a change of traditional roles, women were more willing to have the father stay at home: 55 % of all women while only 42.1 % of all men would have agreed to this arrangement.

### 3. SUMMARY

In this essay, we have published the data of two of our researches which were aimed specifically at the general attitude towards women and men on child-care leave as well as towards their chances of reintegration to the labour market. The results only partially managed to justify the hypothesis we made earlier in this paper.

In the case of female employees on a longer period of child-care leave, it can be said that their long absence does not have a positive effect on their labour-market prospects, and although the mothers are aware of this, they still consciously make a decision of staying at home for a long time. In the period of re-integration, continuous contact with the employer is vital as it facilitates a smoother re-employment process. However, this means that the employer has a greater part to play as well, especially in providing a more tolerant attitude and family-friendly employment methods.

At the same time, our researches have proven that male employees have just as many re-integration problems as their female counterparts if they decide that they should stay at home with the children. It is true that our male respondents claimed they no longer had to conceal their child-care leave absence at a job interview; also, they are less likely to require atypical forms of employment or practical mentor-type help on their return to work. All this is a great advantage when they return to work; however, although re-integration seems to be less stressful for male employees, the respondents still did not think that their long absence from work has a positive influence on their career. Also, they believed that their employers may not be prepared to have one of their male employees take out a child-care leave, which will definitely have a negative impact on their chances of re-integration.

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